

# Stories, Stories, Stories

**Stories that focus the issues parents and teachers face in making inclusive education work for children.**

## Middle School

### Case Study # 2: Building Bridges

**A new principal attempts to develop a trusting and supportive relationship with a grade eight student. The student experiences significant academic challenges and behaviour issues.**

### Cases are from:

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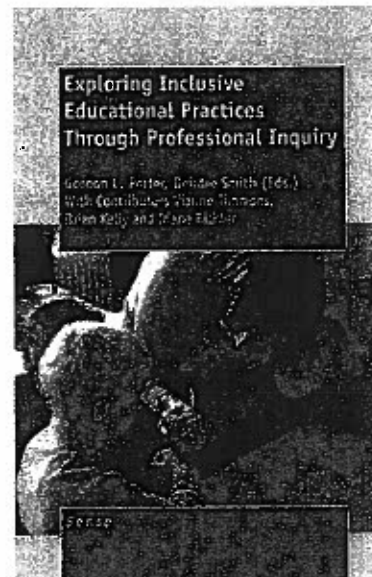


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### Comment on the book:

**Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus, OISE, University of Toronto – wrote the Preface for the book and observed that –**

*This is a book on inclusive education that leaves you with hope and ideas for action. It takes a very difficult and highly charged topic and demonstrates that it is possible to see both the trees and the forest.*



## CASE FOUR: BUILDING BRIDGES

"Steve. Steve," I called out to him. His eyes are fearful. I feel his anger. His anger borders on rage.

Fitting in is so very challenging for Steve. Often his own inappropriate actions and words cause his peers to persecute him. Even with his outbursts, however, I felt that he wanted to be accepted. His eyes were so bright and bold – but his very existence was so tarnished from the poisoned environment of his early life.

Steve has experienced a dysfunctional home, parental divorce, neglect and physical abuse. These experiences have left deep wounds. I realized that, with his basic needs unmet, academic success and social skills would not figure as priorities. How could they be for this grade eight student? From the perspective of my own secure and ordinary life, was it possible for me to ever comprehend the weight of the baggage that he carries each day?

Steve is like a caged bear. He is curious yet reluctant. He is strong yet afraid. He is aggressive yet fearful when challenged. Trust is not an option. Trust requires faith. His faith is like a pane of glass – transparent, brittle and often left shattered.

The reports from his social worker describe the number of times he returned from school to find home doors locked and no one willing to let him in. These reports depicted Steve as a lonely, skinny, under-dressed kid, just hanging around and waiting.

I know that I need to make a connection with Steve to foster a relationship. I know that I need to confront him about his current reality and to provide a continuum of support and hope. How can I develop a rapport with this student? How can I prove to Steve that I can be trusted? How could he trust any adult? I go over and over the issues that are part of Steve and his life. I ask myself, "What strategies might work? How should I try to begin a conversation with him? How could I build up some sense of trust?"

I am the new principal at Steve's school, Forest Ridge. I have only known him for few months. When he sees me, he nods vaguely in my direction. He never makes eye

contact. His response is minimal. It is like he wants to be invisible.

Test scores reveal that academically he is below grade level. His academic deficits have accumulated over time along with his years of neglect, lost opportunities and his rapidly dissipating sense of hope. I can tell that school is a chore for Steve and that he knows that he doesn't fit in with the other students. He seeks attention through his sly wisecracking, his mimicking of teachers, overturning his classmates' books and tripping them in the playground.

His academic curriculum has been modified in an attempt to meet his needs. Our student services team has drafted a special education plan centred on the development of appropriate anger management techniques. Steve's anger can frequently be seen in his face and in his walk. Steve grabs attention from his peers by his aggressive defiance and argumentative nature. It is easy for him to gain power over the other students. All it takes is one of his threatening gestures or the sound of the eerie whistling noise that he makes before striking out at someone.

In Steve's world trust does not exist. There is no value in honesty. Rarely can I believe what he says. Trust is not a word I use in his presence. It is meaningless for him. At times I truly wonder if he really knows the difference between right and wrong.

I have read and reread his cumulative record and his student services file. I have consulted with the teachers who have worked hard to unlock the tight box that is called Steve. Little insight flows from these records and experiences. I do recognize both strength and pride in his nature and posture. I fear his pride will stifle any desire to ever ask for help.

I secretly pledge to make life better for Steve. I don't know yet how this will happen. Where should I start? How do I address academic needs when his basic needs at home are so evidently lacking? How do I address the bullying he experiences from peers when they are fed up and are only turning his tactics back on him? I'm not surprised at the giggles and held noses. Steve's hygiene habits are poor. No wonder Steve's has such a poor self-concept of himself. I ask myself, "Do social skills trump academics? How can I make this school a

safe environment where Steve is valued and accepted by his peers?" With so few positive experiences and good role models in Steve's life, I wonder how I can ever convince him that there is value in coming to school.

Mr. Jones, Steve's classroom teacher, approaches me. He is also greatly concerned with Steve's lack of effort and has identified many dates where homework has not been completed. Mr. Jones' face says it all. He is experiencing conflict between compassion for Steve and his duty as a teacher to impart knowledge. Other teachers at Forest Ridge believe that Steve is capable of meeting their expectations but that their repeated efforts to enforce satisfactory completion have failed. Mr. Jones and other teachers have expressed their concerns that trouble is ahead for this child.

My frustration is mounting. The barriers to making genuine contact with Steve seem insurmountable. I am desperately seeking a weakness in Steve's resolve. I need to find a way to enter his world and lead him out of his tight box.

One Friday in late January, I glance into Steve's classroom on my morning walkabout. I notice that Steve is not there. I continue down the hall past a room that holds the school kitchen. There stood Steve working with his head bent over the kitchen counter beside the teaching assistant. Steve's face shines. It is lit up with excitement. He even has an enthusiastic air about him as he moves from the counter to the stove. I stop and continue to watch mesmerized by the scene.

A math lesson in our school kitchen has provided an opportunity for Steve to cook. Measuring ingredients, mixing and baking seem to provide a joy for Steve that transforms him. This is the first time I have ever observed Steve enjoying anything. He is involved, happy and engaged. Can this be the opening that I have been trying to find?

I acknowledge Steve and remark about how happy he looks in math class. "Hello Steve. You sure look like you are enjoying your school work today."

I leave the kitchen and return to my office. Thirty minutes later, I hear a knock at my door. I turn in my chair and see a face shining with happiness and pride. Steve's smile warms my heart. He grins and asks me

"Would you like a brownie, Mr. Adams? I have never baked anything before and Mrs. Hamilton says they are the best." We share a grin. I realize that he has taken a first step to beginning a conversation. Steve extends his hand like a drawing bridge as he offers me a brownie. I know that we have made a connection.

I accept his generous offering and eat the brownie. It is the best brownie that I have ever eaten.

